

NASA agrees to impact study for spaceport

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NASA has given state space officials – and Volusia County supporters – reason to be a bit more optimistic about a future commercial spaceport here by allowing a key environmental study to move forward.

Space Florida, a state-run economic development agency, hopes to convince NASA to give up a 150-acre site on land the federal agency owns in southern Volusia as a potential site for a vertical launch spaceport, which state officials say would bring jobs and economic development to the region.

So it was good news for the state's space agency when NASA agreed last week to let the Federal Aviation Administration lead an environmental impact statement process on its land.

"We needed this," Dale Ketcham, chief of strategic alliances for Space Florida, said in a meeting with News-Journal editors on Tuesday. "This is a signal to the commercial marketplace that Florida is still in the game."

With both opposition and support growing for the proposal, Space Florida hopes the Volusia County Council will send its own signal on Thursday, endorsing a resolution of support for the Volusia site.

Council members voted 5-2 last month to request a resolution of support, with Pat Northey and Pat Patterson voting against the motion.

The Daytona Regional Chamber of Commerce fully supports the effort, Jim Cameron, the chamber's vice president of government relations, told News-Journal editors Tuesday.

"We see this as a golden opportunity to provide jobs this county needs," Cameron said. "We have a lot of unemployed shuttle workers who are hungry to get back to work."

Even with the number of unemployed dropping locally, Cameron said the county still has an "underemployment problem" with people who graduate from local universities unable to find jobs in their field locally.

Cameron said he is also interested in attracting companies that would manufacture products for the spaceport, such as rockets and payloads.

However, Space Florida still faces an uphill battle on several fronts, including mounting opposition from a growing number of fishing, hunting and wildlife groups.

So far, NASA has said it is not interested in turning over any of its land — now managed as the Merritt Island National Wildlife Refuge and Canaveral National Seashore. The space agency said the land serves as a buffer for its own operations and could be needed for its use in the future.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service confirmed Tuesday it believes the spaceport would impact public use and several protected species, including the Florida scrub jay. The service, which stated it would be willing to look for sites elsewhere on Kennedy Space Center property, also said the National Park Service is concerned about the proposal.

Ketcham said NASA made it clear the approval to let the FAA do the environmental study doesn't mean it's turning land over.

Space Florida is competing with at least two other states to land SpaceX, a company owned by Paypal founder Elon Musk that already conducts commercial space flights and contracts with NASA to deliver supplies to the International Space Station. Texas has emerged as the leading contender.

The FAA, the agency responsible for licensing spaceports, is overseeing environmental impact studies in Texas and Georgia, and released its draft statement for Musk's preferred site in Texas last week.

That study stated impacts would occur during 12 launches planned each year and any test runs that take place, which could require closing public areas, such as nearby beaches, for up to 180 hours a year.

The study doesn't appear to single out any major environmental show-stoppers, Ketcham said. It discusses the potential impacts to humans and wildlife from noise, traffic and groundwater withdrawals.

In Florida, the environmental impact study would take between a year and 18 months, Ketcham said, and include a number of public meetings.

But, before the study can begin, Space Florida and its consultant must select a couple of specific potential locations, he said. Generally, they've been looking in an area known as Shiloh, south of Oak Hill and north of Haulover Canal.

Meanwhile, several groups have come out in opposition, including the Coastal Conservation Association, United Waterfowlers – Florida, and Audubon of Florida.

The Waterfowlers stated a launch failure would be disastrous to habitat.

Charles Lee, advocacy director for Audubon of Florida, said the launches would require closing public areas, impacting beachgoers, boaters, fishermen and those who camp on islands in Mosquito Lagoon.

"You're talking about taking a big bite out of the public recreation use of Mosquito Lagoon," Lee said.

But Ketcham said Space Florida believes its environmental analysis will ultimately help allay the groups' concerns. "A lot of

environmental opposition is based on assumptions of impact that we are confident are significantly overblown," he said.

For example, the spaceport wouldn't require area closures as often as the space shuttle program did, he said, nor as large of an area to be closed.